## Unit G 14: Approaches to ethics based on communication theory

## 1. Summary

Modern approaches to communication theory - such as systems theory, the concept of the socio-cultural code, or actor network theory - have long since overcome the classic tube model of traditional notions of communication. What these new approaches have in common is that they address a comprehensive "field of communication" to which all actors belong and which all actors help to shape.

For ethics, this means that neither a pure "ethics of action" focused on the individual, nor a "social ethics" in the classical sense, nor a deterministic picture of a given context of action that defines itself is of any help.

## 2. Communication-theoretical foundations of ethics

Nowadays, ethics that is to be taken seriously can no longer avoid reflecting on its own foundations in communication theory.

This for three reasons: First, every pragmatics (= factual action) expresses itself in interactions (= mutual acts of action), through which its meaning is constructed again and again anew. Second, every ethics gets its meaning only through "communicative action" (Habermas), which always expresses a certain ethics. And third, every ethic crystallizes in the form of a more or less assertive socio-cultural code (cf. Jäggi 2009), which makes implicit or explicit specifications of action and norms for a large number of possible situations.

## 2.1 Systems theory

An important touchstone for religious and secular ethics is provided by recent systems theory and network approaches in empirical and theoretical social research.

Let us begin with systems theory.

Briefly, a system consists essentially of three components: First, **elements** that interact with each other within the system and are related to each other in some way; second, these same **relationships or relations** among the individual elements; and third, the **system environment**, i.e., everything that does not belong to the system and is distinct from it. Thereby the system organizes itself autonomously (autopoiesis) and is in a more or less stable equilibrium (homeostasis), which can be expressed either as a stable state or as successive, temporally limited system states that repeat themselves over a certain period of time - for example a lake that dries up during the year and is then replenished by precipitation, etc. (for a detailed discussion of systems theory, see ► Unit I 8: "Systems Theory").

Systems theory approaches are in use today in most fields of sociology and the humanities, but also in many applied fields, they in social work, education and teaching, social counseling, coaching, supervision, etc.).

This raises the question of ethics in systems theory on several levels:

1)     **According to which criteria** is **a system defined** and which elements belong to it and which are excluded? For example, does a family system consist only of the nuclear family, or does it also include members of the "extended family"? What legal rights - for example, in terms of social security or residence permits - arise in the first and in the second case for the members and for the system as a whole?

2)     According to which criteria is **power distributed in the system** in question? Which elements have definitional and sanctioning power? How are the relations among the elements defined? Are they egalitarian relationships or is there a large power imbalance between the individual elements?

3)     What is the **potential for change** and which elements have the possibility to change the system equilibrium and the system boundary?

4)     How does the system deal with **changes in the system environment**?

Furthermore, the question arises to what extent the system as a whole can be understood as an acting subject - and what ethical-normative consequences result from this, especially on the level of action.

In ethics, the question of the acting subject and how it can or must assume responsibility is always central. The question of the responsible subject can be posed individually, collectively or institutionally. However, not all ethical theories ask the question about the subject. This is problematic, however, because an ethics of responsibility, for example, can always only be tied to an acting subject - the same applies to an ethics of virtue, which is particularly widespread in the religious sphere. Grade systems tend not to be perceived as acting ethically. But then one would consequently have to deny systems the ability to act in any form, which makes little sense from a system-theoretical point of view - all the more so as strategies of action based on system theory are (still) booming in many social fields today.

A system that organizes itself is always faced with alternative courses of action - and thus automatically with questions about "good" and "evil". And it is not enough to simply say "good is what benefits the system", because every system can organize itself differently. So the problem of ethics remains virulent in systems theory.

## 2.2    Socio-cultural codes

In the sense of the two neurobiologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987:210), communication can be understood as "the mutual triggering of coordinated behaviors among the members of a social unit." In contrast to the conventional - and today outdated - "tube model of communication", according to which "something" is transmitted from a sender A to a sender B, in the sense of Maturana/Varela (1987:212) we understand communication as a more or less permanent, never completed process of mutual influence and alignment of the behavior of individual actors via actions and the meanings they convey. According to these two neurobiologists, "communication occurs every time behavioral coordination occurs in an area of structural coupling" (Maturana/Varela 1987:212). In this context, it is not - as previously assumed - the content of the message that is decisive, but what happens at the receiver (cf. Maturana/Varela 1987:212).

However, actions, interactions or behaviors can only refer to each other if the actors are able to make sense of the actions of others - and to react appropriately to them. In each case, the intention or the "meaning" of an action is "coded" by the acting person and "decoded" again by the observing person.

Because every interaction takes place in a concrete, socio-cultural context, and - as we know since Habermas (1985b:41ff.) - every interaction contains a communicative dimension, a code is applied in every human interaction, which I call socio-cultural code in the following.

At the same time medium and instrument for the "understanding" of actions - or for the participation in the never completed process of "communicative action" - is the so-called socio-cultural code that is applied. That the code, which is used for the coding of the message, is never 100% congruent with the code, which the receiver of a message uses for the decoding of the message, is today to a large extent undisputed. But surprisingly, communication still "works" - even when there is no common framework or only fragments of a common communication framework, such as in certain intercultural contexts (cf. Jäggi 2009:33ff.).

As I have argued elsewhere (cf. Jäggi 2009:21ff.), the socio-cultural code can be understood as the semantic deep structure of certain interactional continua. This means that the socio-cultural code contains, transports, and reproduces the meanings, values, and worldviews that lie beneath the superficial, surface intentions of individual interactions. For example, when I satisfy my hunger at a stand-up joint with a hamburger or eat an organic vegetable stew in a vegetarian restaurant, the superficial intention of action is: "to satisfy hunger." However, the semantic deep structure indicates a completely different lifestyle in the first case (fast food lover) than in the second case (vegetarianism).

Because every interaction generates and reproduces meaning on the one hand, but on the other hand also excludes certain, other ways of acting as an expression of an underlying socio-cultural code - economists would speak of opportunity costs: the costs of other, not

chosen ways of acting -, in principle all actions can be analyzed on the background of the underlying socio-cultural code.

However, this is only possible to a limited extent for individual actions. In contrast, self-contained or at least detached continua of interaction are eminently suitable for analysis as explicit and holistic representations of a socio-cultural code, each with its own horizon of meaning. This is true, for example, for performative rituals such as liturgies or church services, but also for political events.

Concrete settings of interaction can be understood - as the German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1982:28) pointed out in his late work Philosophical Investigations - as language games whose meaning emerges in playing this very language game.

Wittgenstein (1982:28) explains the concept of language-game as follows: "The word 'language-game' here is meant to emphasize that the speaking of language is a part of an activity, or form of life. Consider the manifoldness of language games in these examples, among others:

Commanding, and acting upon commands -

Describing an object by sight, or by measurements -

making an object according to a description (drawing) -

Reporting an event -

Make assumptions about the event - Make a hypothesis

Formulate and test a hypothesis -

Presenting the results of an experiment through tables and diagrams - Making up a story; and reading it.

Inventing a story; and reading it -

Acting -

Sing a round dance -

Guessing riddles -

To make a joke; to tell -

Solve an applied arithmetic problem -

Translate from one language to another -

Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying" (Wittgenstein 1982:28/29).

Thus, both religious acts and liturgical activities, but also everyday, i.e. "profane" interactions, can be understood as language games.  Or as Godfried Cardinal Danneels (201:29) put it with regard to liturgies, "Liturgy is a global symbolic activity that belongs to the category of 'playful'. The uniqueness of 'play' lies in the fact that one 'plays to play', ...".

Every language game, that is, every following of rules - the rules of the particular language game - implies a collective dimension (cf. Wittgenstein 1982:128), just as every interaction contains a communicative dimension. Communicative action in Habermas's sense (cf. 1985a:128) is characterized by the fact that at least two actors capable of speech and action enter into an interpersonal relationship, define their context of action and the rules that apply - or simply adopt and apply given rules. In doing so, these rules generate meaning within the framework of the language game in question - and at the same time totally determine it: "If I follow the rule, I do not choose. I follow the rule blindly" (Wittgenstein 1982:134). Just as there can be no religious liturgies or secular festivities whose order of events is known only to an individual, there can be no language game whose rule is known only to one person. In his famous private language argument, Wittgenstein (1982:157-158) showed this forcefully.

According to Wittgenstein, one cannot play chess and checkers at the same time (cf. Wittgenstein 1982:237), but only either chess or checkers. This is also true for any socio-cultural code that comes into use. We can understand interaction continua as temporally and spatially limited fields of interaction that are more or less clearly delimited from the outside and that consist of a number of interrelated interactions that proceed according to clear and describable rules.

I call the **rules** according to which a particular interaction continuum operates the **socio-cultural code** (cf. Jäggi 2009:16ff.), and **the meanings and contents conveyed by it** the **deep structure** of the socio-cultural code. The **ability** of a socio-cultural code **to enforce certain meanings and behaviors in its scope,** or more generally, to shape its scope, can be called its **semantic potential** (cf. also Jäggi 2009:54ff). For this purpose, it makes use of its **power of**

**definition** (cf. Jäggi 2009:57ff.), i.e. its **internal power of shaping**, and its **power of sanction**, i.e. its **external power of enforcement** (cf. Jäggi 2009:43). The scope of a socio-cultural code can increase or decrease, and the socio-cultural code itself can change. As its assertiveness or power to define decreases, a socio-cultural code tends to rely more heavily on its power to sanction. To put it somewhat casually: the more frequently or the more strongly direct or indirect repression is (have to be) resorted to, the more fragile or weaker the socio-cultural code in question is - and vice versa.

At the same time, the deep structure of each socio-cultural code also contains its own history. This means two things: on the one hand, every socio-cultural code continues to develop uninterruptedly; on the other hand, there is a reciprocal influence between the socio-cultural code, the actions instigated by it, and the environment of the socio-cultural code in question.

Every socio-cultural code is at the same time a kind of transport vessel for ethical-normative statements: By providing for one specific course of action in certain situations and prohibiting another, a socio-cultural code specifies which norms are considered desirable and which are not. And behind this, so to speak, i.e. in the deep structure of the socio-cultural code, a certain conception of ethics, i.e. of good and evil and thus of good and bad, is always also transported.

Every socio-cultural code thus conveys and transports implicit and explicit ethical statements and norms of action, which can be generally valid or situationally defined. This means that each socio-cultural code also represents an ethical-normative system of effects, each of which transports its own content and generates its own norms (rules). Individual socio-cultural codes crystallize their norms in their own codex collections, e.g. in the form of religion-specific codes of law (e.g. Catholic Codex Iuris Cononici) or rules of law (e.g. Kitáb-i-Aqdas of the Bahá'ís).

So, one can compare different socio-cultural codes - whether they are secular or religious codes - also in terms of the ethical-normative content they convey.

A difficult question here is to what extent socio-culturally codified ethics and norms can be changed. In principle, there are two possibilities: Either a socio-cultural code leaves a certain room for maneuver in the form of different alternatives for action - for example, if a religious code leaves it open to believers to cover only their hair or their entire head - or the socio-cultural code specifies only exactly one possible action for a certain situation - for example, if a certain violation of a norm must be punished by death. In this second case, a change of the norm can only take place via a change of the corresponding socio-cultural code, but not within an existing socio-cultural code.

This has serious ethical consequences: Ethical reflection must thus always examine the extent to which a given socio-cultural code does or does not leave open alternative or free spaces for action. In the first case, ethical reflection can take place within the framework of a socio-cultural code and bring about a change in behavior; in the second case, ethical reflection is likely to lead very quickly to a principled questioning of the socio-cultural code in question - with all the consequences.

## 2.3     Network theories

In recent times, the discussion about the Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) has intensified in the German-speaking world as well. Without reproducing this discussion in detail here (cf. in detail on ANT ► Unit I8: "Systems Theory," Chapter 2.7), some problematic points of actor-network theories with regard to their ethical implications are reproduced.

In contrast to - and in continuation of - classical system-theoretical ideas, networks are understood as systems consisting of both human and non-human actors.

In ANT, actors are understood in a twofold sense: On the one hand as "sets of relations" and on the other hand as "nodes in sets of relations" (cf. Röhle 2011:186). Actor-network theory thus looks in two directions, so to speak: "Actors should be perceived as acting entities on the one hand, but on the other hand they are always relationally constituted themselves" (Röhle 2011:186). According to Latour (1994:33), an example of this interaction would be, for instance, a human (= human actor) who becomes a "gunman", i.e. a shooter, through a

firearm (= non-human actor). Human actors and non-human actants work and act together. Thereby - according to Latour (1994:34 and 54) -(human) actors and (non-human) actants interact symmetrically, and both are responsible for acting. This "mediation" (Latour 1994:34) or executed action techniques - e.g. instrumental action - influence the action itself. Thereby, according to Latour (1994:45), possibilities of action, abilities and degrees of freedom in action do not (anymore) lie exclusively with people, but also with techniques, media and instruments. This new relationship between people, technology, social relations and frameworks is what the Actor-Network-Theory ANT tries to catch up with. Acting people, frameworks, techniques and action environment form a kind of collective (cf. Latour 1994:49) that acts together as a network. Thus, ANT redefines the relationship between technology, society and individuals.

According to Belliger/Krieger (2006:16), actor-network theory "shakes up the traditional separation of society and technology." ANT wants to redefine this relationship and wants to consider people like technical apparatuses and social structures as "agents", - this is according to Belliger/Krieger (2006:15) "more radical than any constructivism". Ultimately, from this point of view, the distinction between acting human subject and technical object disappears - a radical concept of system emerges that far exceeds classical systems theory.

Using the example of autonomous vehicles, the political economist Martin Kolmar (in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 16.11.2016:10) has posed a number of interesting questions that arise with regard to their responsibility in traffic: "Let us assume that a self-driving vehicle comes into the following conflict: suddenly five people run onto the road, who would be killed if the vehicle did not change its driving behavior. However, the vehicle can swerve to the other side of the road, where another person or the occupant would be killed. How should the alogarithm be programmed?" (Kolmar in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 16.11.2016:10). Or another example: the car of a parcel delivery driver is parked on the street while the parcel is being delivered. Is an autonomous vehicle now allowed to drive over the safety line to avoid the obstacle, or does it wait - possibly for a very long time - until the driver of the parcel delivery service comes again? A human would probably take the (minor) infraction and drive over the safety line. The problem is, as Kolmar suggests (in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 16.11.2016:10), that "reality [is] always more creative than man. ... Therefore, the law usually only gives

more or less general principles, and it has to be decided situationally about the appropriate behavior within the framework of the law." Now, considering the self-driving car as part of a (traffic) network - vehicles driven by humans would be different - the question arises as to who is responsible for the behavior of the automated vehicle, however it occurs. Who has to do the ethical reflection (the programmer of the software?), who is responsible for the consequences (the operator, the manufacturer or the owner of the vehicle) or does the automatic vehicle even have subject character (can it be "sentenced" to prison or even to destruction)? One can see very nicely from this example that the ANT approach faces major ethical problems.

From the perspective of ethics, this raises the question, "What contribution do actors make to making something happen the way it does in a network of other actors?" (Passoth 2011:266). This applies to nonhuman actors as well as human actors. Concepts of individual or collective ethics of responsibility but also virtue ethics go nowhere with ANT. Networks decide as a unity of human actors and non-human actants about "good" or "bad", "right" or "wrong" - or more precisely: they do not even ask this question anymore, but simply act together in conformity with the network. Ethics as a reflection of actions thus becomes, if not impossible, then at least extremely complex. Something like a new - and ultimately hardly questionable - rationality emerges within the network. This rationality is appropriating - either one belongs to the network or one does not. According to Belliger and Krieger (2014:18), no one can escape this new rationality of networks, and in a comprehensive sense global networks, for long: "Attempts not to participate in networking and not to follow network norms increasingly appear irrational and resemble a psychosocial pathology" (Belliger/Krieger 2014:18), i.e., pathological behavior. But does this not - one might object - ultimately expose this new rationality of "global networks" as unquestionable, appropriating, and ultimately totalitarian?

Stephan Russ-Mohl (in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1.10.2016:11) has shown very nicely how this development can proceed, for example, in the field of modern media: Modern media are examples of actor networks that generate a very specific "attention economy" (Russ-Mohl in Neue Zürcher Zeitung of 1.10.2016:11): In the media, for example, serious, investigative journalism is shifting to "bullshit journalism": "The attention economy in which we live is

visibly transforming into a disinformation economy in which it pays off for certain actors to spread massive amounts of false news, conspiracy theories, and other 'bullshit', especially via social networks." And why? Because these media are designed to create a "dramaturgical effect," a "sense of sensation" - only what is surprising, unusual, emotionalizing or, in a broader sense, "irrational" is paid attention to. This is undoubtedly due on the one hand to human nature, but on the other hand also to the non-human actors who are precisely geared to generating such feelings (Twitter, Youtube, etc.).  This was demonstrated, for example, in the 2016 American election campaign, when social networks such as Twitter and Facebook exacerbated polarization because they used filters that reinforced voters' worldviews and sent them precisely those tailored tweets that fit their profile (cf. Fichter in Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 5.10.2016:8). In this way, these networks made a not insignificant contribution to reinforcing the narrow, selective perception of voters - in other words, exactly the opposite of dialogue and an open exchange of opinions.

This is also where the problem lies from the point of view of ethics - whether secular or religious: On the one hand, non-human factors and structural mechanisms are understood as "actors," while on the other hand, these non-human actors cannot take responsibility for their actions because they are neither self-reflective nor able to act on their own responsibility. When an "Actor Network" constitutes itself, and generates its own space of action, so to speak, it is always human actants that generate the non-human factors directly or indirectly - neither an electronic medium nor a machine can take any part of the responsibility for their actions. Thus, any "Actor Network" faces two problems: Either the emergence and development of "Actor Networks" is understood to be uncontrollable, so to speak, and thus more or less random, or the human actors assume their control function and thus the ethical responsibility for the network. But then exactly what constitutes an "Actor Network" collapses, namely a holistic continuum of action that controls itself as a totality and develops autonomously. Only if an "actor network" can develop an ethical self-responsibility - and this would be conceivable, for example, as a survival or selection criterion for "actor networks" - could this problem be solved.

A particular problem in networks is the question of the power exercised. Castells has pointed out (cf. Belliger/Krieger 2016:3) that in networks "power" is exercised in two forms: On the

one hand, by a "network elite" with usually great IT skills, who have the knowledge and ability to program networks, and on the other hand, by so-called "switchers", i.e. all those who can switch back and forth between networks. It must be said, however, that the first group ("programming elite") has extensive power of definition, while the second group has only "user power", i.e. power of use. Users can either use an offered network or ignore it - nothing more. Qualitative or structural co-design of the network is possible only to a very limited extent, if at all. In principle, this creates a kind of "two-class society," similar to the status of the (ordained) priests and the laity in the Catholic Church. This raises the question of whether, and if so how, "egalitarian" networks are conceivable from the perspective of network theory. In this context, the norms attributed to networks by Belliger and Krieger (2014:16 as well as 2016:4), such as connectivity, flow, transparency, and authenticity, remain either purely technical or constitutive of a network (connectivity and flow) or purely appellative (transparency and authenticity)-that is, "nice to have." The question remains, however, how to address issues of ethics and self-responsible action from the perspective of the ANT approach, and in the second case the question of the acting subject also arises.

## 2.4    Some implications for ethics

A religious belief or a non-religious worldview can never lead to renouncing self-responsible action. If this happens, then it can be assumed that either a kind of "jumping over" (cf. Jäggi 1987:160f. as well as 1986:29) into a belief conception determined by others happens, or even a worldview appropriation. The same problem - only in the opposite direction, so to speak - exists when someone withdraws to a worldview in a foreign-determined, unreflected and defensive way (cf. Jäggi 1987:159f. as well as 1986:28ff.), i.e. with fundamentalist attitudes.

Ethics always means reflection on behavior, i.e., the evaluation of an action against the background of values that are regarded as right or wrong. These values can be both religious and non-religious in character.

In the same way as religious ideas, non-religious attitudes, for example, attitudes regarded as "reasonable," can function as the unquestionable and uncritically applicable basis for

actions - and both are not "ethical" in this case, because they are not factual and self-reflective. Or else, the rationality given and claimed - for instance by a system or a network - eludes ethical reflection, because everything that does not follow the rules of the "language game" in question is declared insignificant, "irrational" or simply not belonging to the language game.

It must be kept in mind that what is considered "rational" or "reasonable" is always predetermined by the system, network, or socio-cultural code in question, which is why the concept of reason - especially if it is to serve as a criterion for ethics - reaches its limits.

However, criteria such as self-reflexivity, questionability of a certain context of meaning and effects can help to go beyond the respective self-understanding of a system, network or socio-cultural code.

It is not decisive whether a system, network or socio-cultural code is defined "religiously"; they may or may not be. But that does not change their character.

It is interesting to note that even eminent religious leaders - such as the Dalai Lama (2011:14) - have explicitly called for secular ethics, perhaps precisely because ethics cannot be confined to religious systems: "What we need today is an ethical foundation that does not refer to belief systems and is therefore acceptable to both religious and non-religious people: a secular ethics. ... I am confident that it is possible and worthwhile to try to forge a new path toward a universally valid secular ethic" (Dalai Lama 2011:14). The Dalai Lama (2011:30) emphasized that he did not share the opinion that there could be no truth without belief in God and that ethics could also only become binding through God: "I do not believe that ethics must be based on religious ideas or beliefs. Rather, I firmly believe that ethics can also emerge simply as a natural and reasonable response to our very humanity and the human nature common to us all" (Dalai Lama 2011:31). However, the Dalai Lama (2011:33/34) also emphasized, "I am not among those who think that humanity will soon turn away from religion altogether. On the contrary, I believe that it is a positive force that can do an extraordinary amount of good. By providing a view of human life that transcends

our temporary physical existence, religion gives hope and strength to those who suffer hardship" (Dalai Lama 2011:33/34).

So, an important task of newer social science approaches such as systems theory, network analysis, and also the socio-cultural code is to reflect on and define their stance on ethics and, if necessary, develop their own approach-specific ethics. Closely connected to the question of ethics is also the reflection of one's own claim to power or, more generally, the issue of power. This can be seen, for example, in the scope, in the self-organization and in the structure of the system, the network or the socio-cultural code.

### 3. Control Questions

1. Briefly outline the central statements of system theory.

2. Where do ethical issues arise in systems theory thinking?

3. What is meant by a socio-cultural code?

4. In what way do ethical questions arise in this approach?

5. What is the central proposition of actor network theory?

6. Where do ethical questions arise in actor network theory?

7. Why is it so important in modern communication theories and approaches that an ethical self-reflection function or level is built into them?

### 4. Links

**Diverse Texte zu Kommunikation und Ethik**
http://www.stefanstreiff.ch/

**Was macht eine gelingende Kommunikation aus!**
**Von David Bohm**
https://ethik-heute.org/was-macht-eine-gelingende-kommunikation-aus/

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